

## **Serbia: Hague Tip-off Prompts Mladic Raid**

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Serbian officials cast doubt over credibility of tribunal's lead as latest bid to capture top war crimes suspect fails.

Late on the morning of May 15, around 50 heavily armed members of the Serbian military police broke into the five-storey Military Hotel in central Belgrade and conducted a search for one of the most wanted war crimes fugitives, former Bosnian Serb army general Ratko Mladic.

But the raid - as several others undertaken by the Serbian authorities over the last few years - yielded no results.

The latest attempt to arrest Mladic followed a tip-off from Hague prosecutors, who claim Mladic has been hiding in Belgrade for years.

"We received information about the possible whereabouts of Mladic and immediately passed it on to the local authorities [in Belgrade] and they decided to act," said spokesperson for the Office of the Prosecutor, OTP, Olga Kavran at a press conference held in The Hague a day after the raid.

"Unfortunately, it appeared that this particular search did not lead to results, but the OTP [will] keep trying."

The raid was launched at a very sensitive moment for Serbia - the same day a new government was finally being elected, almost four months after parliamentary elections.

Chairman of Serbia's National Council for Cooperation with the tribunal Rasim Ljajic told Belgrade television B92 that his request for the raid to be postponed for just one day was turned down by the OTP.

"We were afraid that insisting on postponing this operation could be seen as hesitation on our side and an attempt to hide a person indicted for war crimes, so we had to act," he said.

Ljajic added that the raid was carried out "very professionally" and that no one knew about it until late in the afternoon, when one of the residents of the hotel called reporters and told them about the search.

But Ljajic raised some doubts about the credibility of the information the tribunal apparently had about Mladic's whereabouts. He said he didn't for a moment think the general would be hiding at the Military Hotel, a building with 149 rooms and usually very busy.

"It was not logical for the most wanted war crimes fugitive to be hiding in place with so many people," he said.

Ljajic added that no one can say for sure that Mladic is in Serbia, but the tribunal will continue to put

pressure on the Serbian government to arrest him as long as they don't get a firm proof that he's somewhere else.

"It's partly our fault ... We gave the tribunal reason to believe that we cannot do anything unless we are put under pressure," he told B92.

Out of 161 persons indicted by the tribunal, six remain at large. They are Mladic, former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, ex-Bosnian Serb army officer Zdravko Tolimir, former president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serb Krajina Goran Hadzic, wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb police Stojan Zupljanin and ex-Serbian police general Vlastimir Djordjevic.

In an interview published only two days after the latest unsuccessful attempt to capture Mladic, Kavran told Belgrade newspapers Danas and Vecernje novosti that five remaining fugitives are currently in Serbia, while Djordjevic was in Russia.

Pointing out that cooperation with Belgrade had been virtually at a standstill for over a year now, Kavran said the OTP was expecting a new government to be more efficient when it comes to apprehending the remaining fugitives.

"We are ready to collaborate with the new government in Serbia, we look forward to their contacting us, if this will lead them to undertake effective steps towards achieving full cooperation," she said.

"Serbia is the only state in the world that is in violation of the tribunal's statute and of the Genocide Convention, as well as several UN Security Council resolutions."

Kavran also said Belgrade should influence Russia to locate and arrest Djordjevic.

But Ljajic says this is too much to ask from Serbia, which "cannot exert pressure on Russia" to bring the former Serbian police official to justice.

However, some observers in Serbia have faith in the newly elected government and think it will do more than its predecessors to pursue remaining war crimes suspects.

"We believe that Belgrade will intensify its cooperation with the tribunal after forming the new government," Aleksandra Milenov, representative of the Hague tribunal's office in Belgrade, told Serbian Radio.

"It is really a disgrace that after 12 years we are still talking about fugitives."

Merdijana Sadovic is IWPR's Hague programme manager.

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